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ABSTRACT

The learning organization (LO) can be described as an organizational culture in which individual development is a priority, outmoded and erroneous ways of thinking are actively identified and corrected, and all members clearly understand and support the purpose and vision of the organization. The LO has proved difficult to define. These five different types of definitions have been found: philosophical, mechanistic, educational, adaptive, and organic. At the conceptual level there is disagreement about the premises on which the LO is based. At the most fundamental level are two very different conceptions of organizational learning--learning in organizations and learning by organizations. Another reservation about the concept of the LO concerns whether it can be measured. A common misconception in implementation is that the LO is an attainable finished product, an idea doomed to failure because the LO is a developing ability to conduct a continual process--learning--over the long term. The shadow side to the LO is its use as a way to get more out of the work force or downsize. Other concerns in implementation are the conflict between learning and earning; who is learning; how to provide a menu of learning approaches; how to allow for mistakes; and the possibility that the conclusion of the learning is that the organization should be dismantled. (22 references) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Michael E. Wonacott

MYTHS AND REALITIES 2000
NO. 12

The Learning Organization: Theory and Practice

Is a learning organization "like a living organism, consisting of empowered, motivated employees, living in a clearly perceived symbiosis, sharing the feeling of a common destiny and profit, striving towards jointly defined goals, anxious to use every opportunity to learn from situations, processes and competition in order to adapt harmoniously to the changes in their environment and to improve continuously their own and their company's competitive performance" (Otala 1995, p. 163)? Or is it an aspiration often viewed cynically by staff who don't believe the rhetoric is sincere (Garratt 1999)? Does it offer individuals liberation and empowerment to maximize their full potential as innovative, intelligent workers (Fenwick 1995)? Or is it a tool that can turn into a weapon (Marsick and Watkins 1999)? This ***Myths and Realities*** examines different views of the learning organization, both in theory and in practice.

The Learning Organization in Theory

Cullen (1999) dates the current popularity of the learning organization from Peter Senge and his five disciplines characterizing learning organizations (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking). The learning organization can be described as "an organizational culture in which individual development is a priority, outmoded and erroneous ways of thinking are actively identified and corrected, and the purpose and vision of the organization are clearly understood and supported by all its members. Within this framework, the application of systems thinking enables people to see how the organization really works; to form a plan; and to work together openly, in teams, to achieve that plan" (Worrell 1995, p. 352). That characterization of the learning organization has powerful intuitive appeal and promise (Fenwick 1995).

Defining the concept. However, the learning organization has proved difficult to define. Otala (1995) found five different types of definitions—philosophical, mechanistic, educational, adaptive, and organic—and characterizes them all as "elusive" (p. 157). As Senge himself recently stated (Abernathy 1999, p. 40), "no one understands what a learning organization is, least of all me…anyone's description of a learning organization is, at best, a limited approximation." Indeed, Smith and Tosey (1999) call the learning organization concept more rhetorical than actual—more a concept to focus aspiration than some objective state. Such a rhetorical focus on laudable outcomes without information on the process and inputs necessary to attain those outcomes often leaves organizations without a complete understanding of the concept (Reynolds and Ablett 1998).

Analyzing the concept. Even at the conceptual level, there is some disagreement about the premises on which the learning organization is based. Consider, at the most fundamental level, two very different conceptions of organizational learning—learning *in* organizations and learning *by* organizations, both arising from the assertion that all learning takes place inside individual human heads (Popper and Lipshitz 2000). Learning *in* organizations poses the puzzle of how the learning of individuals becomes organizational; learning *by* organizations poses the different puzzle of how learning can take place outside individual human heads.

Harris (2000) raises questions about the power of organizational learning to fundamentally transform people and the places where they work. Likewise, "social units can learn from experience, but they do not always do so even when individuals learn on behalf of the system (Marsick, Bitterman, and van der Veen 2000, p. 2). A former manufacturing CEO (Mariotti 1999) contends that unlearning the old way—old habits, old beliefs, old behaviors—is just as critical and often more difficult; a former vice president and chief learning officer maintains that, although learning is a given (people learn things all the time), it is not a given that organizations can create their future by learning (Webber 2000).

Measuring the concept. Another reservation in the concept of the learning organization concerns whether or not it can be measured (Smith and Tosey 2000). Assessing progress, measuring learning activity, and linking learning to return on investment all depend on measuring learning itself, and the assessment of learning is problematic. Learning is a construct, not an activity, hence not inherently observable; but what observable, measurable behaviors or qualities can serve as proxies for learning? Measuring formal learning activities is quite different from measuring the change in performance that is the purpose of learning—and the essence of the learning organization.

The Learning Organization in Practice

End or means to an end? A common bump in the road to implementation is the idea that the learning organization is a finished product that can be attained—and quickly. That idea is doomed to failure because the learning organization is a developing ability to conduct a continual process—learning—over the long term (Garratt 1999; Smith 1999). Ikehara (1999) cautions that organizations err in considering learning as the *end* of the learning organization; rather, it is the *means* to the learning organization. In fact, although learning almost by definition generates new knowledge, new knowledge alone is not sufficient to create a learning organization; new knowledge must be applied to improve the performance of the organization's activities (Patterson 1999). Such confusion in organizations may be attributed to the lack of a universal definition of the learning organization that can be widely applied to many organizations as well as guidelines to implement the ideas (Reynolds and Ablett 1998).

To what—or whose—purpose? There can be a shadow side to the learning organization (Marsick and Watkins 1999). Learning can be a core competence of the organization; a source of renewal, energy, and revitalization; the employee's tool against layoffs, cutbacks, and reengineering—but it can also be just one more way to get more out the work force for less or even an indirect approach to firing. For that matter, the social-capital empowerment of workers can be subverted—or at least perceived to be subverted—by management to such human-capital uses as downsizing, restructuring, and invasion of privacy (Fenwick 1995).

Learning or earning? The learning organization's primary goal of developing its ability to learn from experience requires a long term, and it often conflicts with the short-term bottom line of productivity, accountability, results, efficiency, and profitability (Bierema 1997; Fenwick 1995; Steiner 1998). Holding learners both to short-term performance and traditional business results and to the long-term learning organization vision of learning not only creates time conflicts for employees; it also creates false expectations that set the learning organization and its learners up for failure (Webber 2000).

Whose learning? Despite the powerful intuitive appeal of Senge's five disciplines, consensual learning through experience doesn't always occur (Steiner 1998). Individuals often have different mental

models, levels of personal mastery, and systems thinking, so there is no guarantee of team learning and shared vision. Some individuals may be reluctant to speak the truth as they perceive it to managers or peers, perhaps because of adverse experience in the past; some individuals just don't want to take part in consensual, organizational decision making—they just don't want the responsibility. Finally, the learning organization concept may collide with more traditional, hierarchical, even authoritarian organizational styles and structures in practice (Harris 2000; Marsick, Bitterman, and van der Veen 2000).

What counts as learning? The learning organization must (but unfortunately doesn't always) take into account the very diverse range of individual approaches to learning (Gerber 1998). A menu of approaches might certainly include traditional, formal training events, but it should also provide opportunities for continuous, reflective, individualized, and/or collective activities through self-directed learning, problem solving, applying theory in practice, open lateral planning, advocacy, and quality assurance. Particularly important is provision for and recognition of continuous *informal training*—deceptively casual idle chatter, lingering coffee breaks, and discussions in the hallway (Dobbs 2000).

What price learning? The learning organization applies its past experience to learn how to adapt to the future—how to break new ground; breaking new ground inevitably involves making mistakes. An organization that does not allow mistakes uses the learning organization as a weapon, not as a tool (Marsick and Watkins 1999). In the culture of the learning organization, learning must be allowed through making—but not repeating—mistakes.

And what if...? What if the empowered individuals in a learning organization pooled their personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking and reached the experientially based, consensual, conclusion that the organization has ceased "to serve a useful purpose and should be dismantled" (Fenwick 1995, p. 21)? Would that perspective—that learning—be tolerated?

The Learning Organization in Review

It would be easy to conclude that on the face of it, the "semireligious hype...of utopian 'visionaries,' who added a reverential, almost hallucinatory touch" to Senge's idealistic definition of the five disciplines of the learning organization (Otala 1995, p. 157) is just that—semireligious hype. That conclusion might be reinforced not only by the critical analysis and implementation concerns discussed in this ***Myths and Realities*** but also by recurring calls for empirical, data-based research on the outcomes and effectiveness of the learning organization (Ellinger, Yang, and Ellinger 2000; Harris 2000; Smith and Tosey 1999; Worrell 1995).

Nevertheless, it remains difficult to reconcile that conclusion with another piece of reality. It may be hard to define the learning organization, it may be awkward to coordinate all the parts and assumptions of the learning organization theory with the whole, and it may be difficult to implement the learning organization in practice—but the learning organization continues to exert a powerful, intuitive appeal and promise to organizations that must somehow find a way to learn their futures. Perhaps the myth is just the semireligious hype; perhaps the reality is the power of the concept, however much it might need to be refined.

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